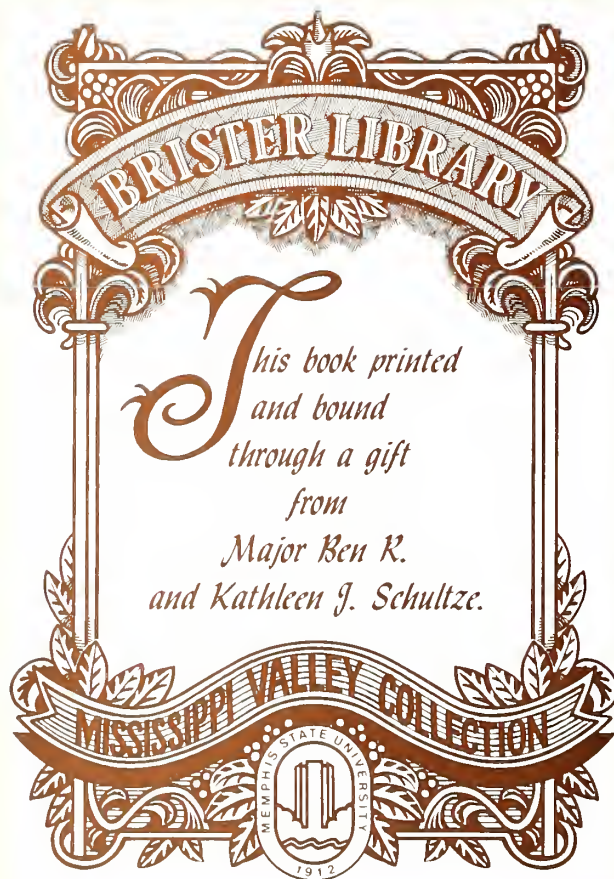


AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WINFIELD DUNN ADMINISTRATION
INTERVIEW WITH
RODGER KESLEY

BY - CHARLES W. CRAWFORD
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INTERVIEW WITH RODGER KESLEY

JULY 22, 1976

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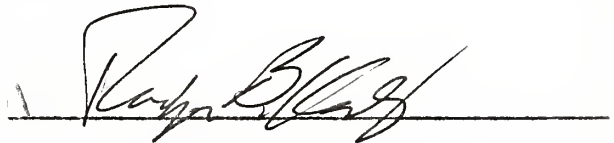
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ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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PLACE Nashville, TN

DATE July 22, 1976



(INTERVIEWEE)



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for city council here in Knoxville. I worked somewhat in his campaign as a college freshman. And I sort of got the bug from that standpoint. Then next got involved in Senator Howard Baker's campaign in 1966 while I was in college and was on the state board of Young Tennesseans for Baker Co-Chairman at the University of Tennessee during that year.

I next became involved in the 1968 presidential campaign in Washington. I worked in Washington as the National Coordinator of Participation in Politics-the United Citizens for Nixon-Agnew which was a nation-wide program whereby we had oh about 30 or 40 field men under my direction throughout the country and it tape recorded messages from just interested people to the candidates on any issue they wished to comment on or asked questions and they responded accordingly by letter from these people.

I next was involved in the primary in 1970 just subsequent to my graduation from law school for the political campaign in the Republican primary of Claude Robertson, who I believe came in third or fourth in the primary. Do you want me to go ahead in how I became involved in the Dunn campaign?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, please.

MR. KESLEY: I had just passed the bar exam and was in Knoxville and actually talking to my now senior partner and thinking about going to work for this law firm in another office. And I got a call from Lamar Alexander from Washington, whom I had met through previous campaigns. He told me

that he was getting ready to come to Nashville to be Winfield Dunn's campaign manager and asked if I would come over and help. I told him then that I wasn't sure that I wanted to stay involved in politics very much but that I would come over two weeks and help get the offices set up and this sort of thing. Which I did and I came and got involved and stayed. I haven't left Nashville I don't guess, since then. Primarily my responsibility was in the general election campaign that year.

I originally started out as helping set up, office manager for the campaign--statewide campaign headquarters that is--getting telephones, desks, papers, pencils, hiring secretaries etc. After about two weeks of that, I decided I wanted to do something else. I guess I ended up being in charge of most of the advance work in that campaign.

My first real project was going back to Knoxville and helping the local people there in Knoxville--the Dunn and Republican County Chairman--assisting him in setting up kick-off rallies that were held in Knoxville at the Civic Auditorium, I guess in October--early October--or late September of 1970.

DR. CRAWFORD: Let's go back just a little. When did you get the call from Lamar Alexander--approximately?

MR. KESLEY: I don't remember. I believe it was about the first part of September. It was probably about two to four weeks after. It was either late August

or first of September. I can't remember exactly. Probably two or three weeks after the August primary.

DR. CRAWFORD: When they were reorganizing for the general?

MR. KESLEY: Right. Lamar had not even come to Nashville yet. He was calling from Washington, was still on the White House Staff then but was leaving the next two or three days. And I got to Nashville about the same day he got here. We originally set up shop over in the . . . we had a couple of hotel suites at the Sheraton near the U.S. Courthouse.

As I say, one of our biggest priorities that I had was to try to get us some more permanent office space located in Nashville. You know, more permanent office situation set up because there had not been any. There had been a store-front operation for Winfield Dunn in the primary and they were making arrangements to move that headquarters into the old--I think it was an old car dealership down next to Union Station--which has now been torn down where the store-front operation of volunteers were set up.

We pretty much decided for a statewide campaign office. We needed to be a little more secluded where people wouldn't just walk in and disrupt whatever might be going on--that is as far as a press conference and scheduling and campaign decision making. We felt like we needed to be a little more isolated not from public scrutiny, or from public view at least from the standpoint that you can get something done without people breathing down our neck all the time. We ended up getting campaign offices set up in the Parkway Towers. We

got some office space over there. At least we had about one, two, three, four offices, reception area and secretarial pool area and set up a separate financial office in the basement. The financial people in and out of their home, but that was during the first part of that campaign.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was that about in September?

MR. KESLEY: Yes, at least that was in early September or late August or in that time frame.

DR. CRAWFORD: You graduated from law school at that time?

MR. KESLEY: Yes, I had graduated in the spring of 1970 in June of 1970. I passed the bar, I guess the week after the 4th of July--Thursday and Friday after the 4th of July of that year. I had just found the results of it that I had passed it.

I don't know if you know the people that were involved at that time, do you need that?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, go into that as you remember it if you will.

MR. KESLEY: I believe Lee Smith was down from Senator Baker's staff, had resigned and came down to assist. Lamar was overall campaign coordinator or chairman or his campaign manager in charge of the nuts and bolts aspect of the campaign. Lee Smith resigned from Senator Baker's staff approximately the same time and came with Lamar and his primary responsibility was in the political organization. He was making sure that every county

had a Dunn chairman and made sure that they were in coordination with the Republican chairman and generally just to talk and soothe these people's consciences. Ralph Griffith also took a temporary leave of absence from Senator Baker's office and handled the press and I believe he came down right about the same time or maybe a couple days later. Sam Furrow was from Knoxville and he was an auctioneer from Knoxville, a young fellow. He was a good friend of Lamar's. Lamar talked him into coming over and helping to handle the Governor's schedule at that particular time. Along with and they brought up from Memphis Carolyn Weins who was really the only person in the Nashville campaign headquarters that had worked previously in the primary. She moved up here and assisted and I guess Sam and she both handled the scheduling for the Governor and the rest of the things.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was Stephen Sharp there?

MR. KESLEY: Yes, Stephen Sharp, I'll take that back. Stephen Sharp did come up from Memphis also. He had worked in the primary before Lamar. In the primary he had handled all the press. He then shifted to a role under Ralph as an assistant to him as far as the press was concerned during the general election. Ralph being the old hand from political press relations standpoint in the state with experience, at least from a Republican standpoint. Steve was here and moved about the same time Carolyn did, I guess. Several other people were hired, Mary Jane Creel was hired to take over as office manager which was the best thing I did for the campaign was to hire somebody that re-

placed me in that function. She did an outstanding job. I hired several secretaries and a lot of them ended up in the Governor's office. Frances Dodds and Lewis and I was trying to think who else. Marsha Eckelby worked. She was pregnant at the time. She came up and volunteered and was our receptionist, answered phones and that sort of thing.

Chip Christianson came on board just after that period of time to travel with the Governor, hired to travel with the Governor and to take the telephone calls and keep reminding the Governor and keeping him on time and report back as to what was happening and that sort of thing. That was his primary responsibility.

DR. CRAWFORD: This was sort of a job to keep the Governor on time particularly.

MR. KESLEY: Right. It was a tough job. Governor Dunn was probably the most. . . and had more energy as far as campaigning and stuff as anybody I've ever, you know. He was boundless in the amount of energy. He seems to get pumped up in crowds.

DR. CRAWFORD: He enjoys being with people which make it hard to remain on a tight schedule.

MR. KESLEY: Also it means long hours, because he is up at 6 and doesn't get to bed until midnight. He's on the go.

As I say, about that time I, as soon as the offices were set up here, went back to Knoxville and spent about three weeks there pre-

paring for the campaign kick-off.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you remember the date of that?

MR. KESLEY: I honestly don't. It was right in the first week of October, or the last week of September. It was on during the A & I Fair Week. I can't remember what day of the week it was on now. It was during the Tennessee Valley A & I Fair in Knoxville and that could have been the last part of September because I remember we had some problem and conflict and I was afraid that we wouldn't be able to draw a fair crowd because of the fair going on and all that sort of thing. It turned out that that was not as big a problem as we had anticipated it would be. It was on the same day that all the schools were out and it was Teacher's Day, you know, or the schools day at the Fair. You may be able to find the date from that.

DR. CRAWFORD: Who worked with you in coordinating the campaign kick-off?

MR. KESLEY: In Knoxville, Marshall Brown worked quite a bit and worked with Dick Impe, the treasurer or fund raiser for Knox County. A doctor, I've forgotten his name. Winfield had a chairman up there.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mobley perhaps?

MR. KESLEY: Yes, Dr. Mobley was one of them too, but this doctor was a pharmacist.

DR. CRAWFORD: Could it have been E. S. Bevins?

MR. KESLEY: E.S. Bevins, yes, Dr. E.S. Bevins. Some of the other young people that got involved

let's see, well, Joanne Clarke worked pretty much, a great person. She was the women's co-chairman.

DR. CRAWFORD: Betty Sterchi?

MR. KESLEY: That's who I was trying to think of. Some of the young people who were involved was Cynthia Foust and I think she's since married. And Mary McNally, who married Lewis Foster, an attorney, who helped a lot as a volunteer. I can't remember who was in charge of the Dunn Dollies.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you know who developed this concept of the Dunn Dollies? They were used in quite a number of cities.

MR. KESLEY: Yeah, that was Dunn. I don't know who came up with that idea, but it was a great idea. I think it had been used quite successfully in the primary, and it may have been Betty Sterchi or somebody from Knoxville or I'm not sure it might have been somebody in Memphis, one of the two places.

DR. CRAWFORD: I know they were used in both.

MR. KESLEY: We ended up having, the night of the actual event, about a hundred Dunn Dollies--girls with sashes that said, "I'm a Dunn Dolly." They added a lot to the festivities.

DR. CRAWFORD: Uh-huh. Let's see you had a large crowd.

MR. KESLEY: We had about 2,000 people out there. The whole first floor. It was in the auditorium part was opposed to the coliseum part of the Knoxville auditorium/

coliseum complex which is the one that has a pretty stage and we had the whole first floor filled and a pretty good crowd in the balcony. It was not a packed house, but we had a couple of large inverted parachutes filled with balloons and confetti and dumped down at the appropriate time. We had a lot of young people--high school and college age--who helped, you know, helped manually do all the things like painted posters, signs. We must have had 200 signs that were individually painted by kids prior to the meeting to pass out as they came in. One of the best things on the signs was: "Mossy Springs is for Dunn."

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you have some signs about that?

MR. KESLEY: Anything you could think of. We had a party for high school kids. About fifty of them showed up on the Saturday before. Actually they had signs painted that day and we furnished the paint and they went to it and painted a bunch of signs. We had on the stage there every county chairman in our First Congressional District. We assigned the counties in and around, especially the Second District, we assigned them all quotas. We had it set up like conventions where certain counties [or] where we had in the audience a reserved--semi-reserved section--for each county so that they could all sit together.

DR. CRAWFORD: With signs, I suppose?

MR. KESLEY: Right. Inflated Balloons started dropping from the top. We tried to make it a mini-national convention.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did you coordinate this with the other candidates at the time?

MR. KESLEY: As far as Republican candidates? We invited all them to come. This was a Dunn kick-off rally for governor. We did invite all the other candidates--all the other candidates. Senator Brock came and we really informed them what we were doing and asked them what time to be there and where. Most of them worked it into their campaign and did come--most of the Congressional candidates as well as Senator Brock and Senator Baker. Archie Campbell was the M.C.--he did a great job--of Hee Haw fame. Tex Ritter came and entertained and I think some more entertainment. And I think Tex was the one who helped us get the other entertainment. We had one of the local high school bands--I guess it was Doyle High School--played the Star Spangled Banner and entertained prior to [the rally].

I think it came off pretty well. After that I came back to Nashville and worked on just where ever the Governor was going to be, and asked the county chairman or whoever is in charge to make sure he got to and from, and would give them a list of preparations that might be made in places he would go and help with arrangements and to make sure that decorations were put up, flyers were gotten out in surrounding counties and everybody knew and tried to coordinate with one county if they were going to have an event and to coordinate with surrounding counties so that they would know when it was going to happen and what time and try to get them involved.

DR. CRAWFORD: I want to ask you about the negative aspect of it, but what counties did you find most effective and what counties needed your services least in Nashville?

MR. KESLEY: Well, Memphis--I didn't go into Memphis.

Mainly because they themselves knew the area and had run the Governor's campaign during the primary on this. Most of the people who had worked in his campaign during the primary were from Memphis. They had that situation pretty well under control. We felt like that I didn't have to worry with Memphis. Let them decide what they want to do and handle it. They were better organized as far as the grass roots campaign structure, having block captains and this sort of thing, where they could get out and organize very quickly and they already had their structure set up much better than most of the other counties. Traditional Democratic areas were tough to work with from the standpoint that it was tough to get people involved on any kind of a large deal and that sort of thing.

Chattanooga, we did not do a great deal there. I did spend some time in the First District and in Knoxville because I knew that area. Chattanooga we did not spend a great deal of time there as far as I was concerned because most of the events we had there were in conjunction with Bill Brock. It was his home district and he had his people and they were working, you know, primarily from that and they had that pretty well covered. So we didn't worry so much about try-

ing to advance those areas. We didn't even plan to have any large events in traditional Democratic areas, the type that I wanted to very much because we felt like they wouldn't go over very well anyway.

I did do the advance work in Johnson City when Nixon and Agnew came to Johnson City. Also came back and went to work on advancing three or four sites here in Middle Tennessee for the debate.

Then about the last two weeks of the campaign I then switched over--or about the last week anyhow--on the election night activities and on setting up our campaign headquarters and getting things ready for that as far as getting phone lines and organizing from that standpoint. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

DR. CRAWFORD: I think so. What did you do in Middle Tennessee?

MR. KESLEY: The main thing that we did here, as far as what I did, was on the debate day. I assisted the local people here. Most of the things I did, I would not go in unless it was going to be great big. Mainly, what I did was suggesting to people over the phone how to go about it. Lots of things like where they could go to get types of things. Where they could get information on where they could get busses, types of signs they could make and decorations--types of places where they could get decorations in every location, where they could get confetti and where they could get things if it was going to be a big event.

Mainly, what we did here in Middle Tennessee was the debate. We

tried to gather a lot of the local people up and to see that they were out there so that we wouldn't have too hostile a crowd out there. We worked with the local people trying to get a good crowd at the debate.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did you coordinate work? I know you did a great deal of this work with Bill Brock who was running for the senate. What about the Congressional races? Did you go through the districts? Did you coordinate any of your work with the First?

MR. KESLEY: Jimmy was really harder to work with, and he always kind of is. I don't say that disparagingly. He is the type of individual that likes to know everything that goes on in his District and to coordinate and run anything in his district as far as Republican politics is concerned. This is probably a legitimate concern of his because he doesn't want somebody coming in and siphoning off his people to work on somebody else's campaign. He has his organization set up. He likes to run a coordinated ticket more than any other group out there. We had to run everything in the campaign through him as far as the First Congressional District was concerned. We did end up making certain areas that we felt like we had to get offices.

DR. CRAWFORD: When you turned the coordination over in these areas to the Congressman, did you feel that it was being handled as well as you could have done it?

MR. KESLEY: Well, that was one of our problems. We

felt like we couldn't completely turn it over. We did end up, I think, over some of the complaints appointing a Dunn chairman in every county. In a lot of areas he helped to select people in other areas when we couldn't wait on his selection so we selected them ourselves, but we always worked within his organization. I don't think we had any complaints. There were temporary irritations during that period of time to be concerned with. We had factors, particular political decisions, that we might go one way and he might go another, I can't really think of any right now. By and large we worked with Duncan in his areas and would not necessarily call Jimmy and say, "Hey, Jimmy, we want to go into Tazewell today. Would you set something up for us?" We'd call like we decided we wanted to do that, we'd call our people and have them set it up and might call him and say, "This is fine and we want to do it this way." And we might end up with some negotiations. Mainly, the things that we did up there were with him, I'd say 99% of the time. There was a bus tour that was made. I guess the senator was on that tour too. I know Senator Brock and Quillen and Dunn were all on the bus tour. It was a fairly easy tour made. It sounds a little more complicated than it probably really was. There were some rough times. Jimmy would get mad at some of the staff and the Governor would sit down and talk with him and see that we ironed things out.

DR. CRAWFORD:

How did you get along with the people who had worked on the Dunn campaign at the

beginning? Some people had been working since the primary. How did you use them at this time?

MR. KESLEY: It would depend upon county by county and individual by individual basis. During the primary campaign, the chairman was Harry Wellford from Memphis. And he was the overall chairman and he and Lamar worked very well together and he was eager and willing to allow Lamar and gave him a great deal of latitude. Based on the day to day nit-picking type of decisions, as long as he was kept informed, they pretty much talked over everything, but Lamar was given a lot of latitude. As far as individual county basis the pre-primary Dunn chairmen were retained. Some of them were very effective in the primary, and those that were most effective were used primarily in the general election, but those who had not been as effective as other chairmen somebody was added on with them in certain areas as well as what would improve the Republican chances depending upon county by county basis. The new people that came in were very conscious of that and that could have been a problem. I guess maybe on a couple of isolated instances, by and large, the transition from the pre-primary days to the early and later days of the bringing in of the new people--did not seem to be a great problem in most cases. This was a year where Republicans couldn't afford to fight. They had to elect a senator and a governor. They were about to win for the first time in years and none of them were willing to cause that much of a fuss over personalities.

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